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Soviet mass violence in Estonia revisited

OLAF MERTELSMANN and AIGI RAHI-TAMM

Soviet mass violence in the annexed Baltic republics was first researched by émigré historians, who could not use archives. Due to the “archival revolution” we possess today a more variegated picture of the scale and nature of Soviet repression. Approximately 12–14 percent of the population became victims of Soviet persecution and 4 percent died. Single cases of mass killings and 3,000 death penalties are documented, but the majority of deaths stemmed from criminal neglect. While émigré historians often used the term “genocide,” the authors believe that speaking of “different waves of cleansing” better grasps the nature of Soviet violence in Estonia and the diversity of its victims, means and targets. Mass violence did not only occur in the name of “cleansing.” In the struggle with armed resistance and in forced collectivization it also played an essential, if more instrumental role. While the Kremlin initiated the vast majority of repression in a top-down approach using bureaucratic methods, there is evidence too of “spontaneous” violence conducted by local authorities. There is also proof of a compromise policy, such as several amnesties aimed at people in the underground. The enormous population losses of one quarter of the population due to war and terror cannot be denied, but the term “genocide” as applied to the Estonian context is appropriate only for the Holocaust and the killing of the Gypsy population during the Nazi occupation. Nevertheless, Stalinism resulted in five times more casualties among the Estonian population than Nazi rule.

Introduction

The Republic of Estonia, the northernmost of the three Baltic States, waged a war against Russia in 1918–20 to earn its independence. However, its peaceful development as an independent nation-state did not last for long. This young democracy with 1.1 million inhabitants faced an authoritarian putsch in 1934 and its fate was sealed by the secret protocol of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty in August 1939, when Stalin and Hitler divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. After a Soviet ultimatum, the country was forced to accept the stationing of Soviet troops in autumn 1939. In summer 1940, a second ultimatum led to military occupation by the Red Army, installation of a Soviet-friendly puppet government and finally, after mock elections, annexation by the USSR. Only in 1991 was independence restored.¹ Estonia belonged thus to the “western borderlands” of the Soviet Union, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The territories incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939–40 included the three Baltic States, Eastern

Poland, and Bessarabia. Approximately 23 million people thus became Soviet citizens, most of them against their will. Several similarities mark Soviet policy in this region, the “western borderlands,” but each country must also be considered in light of its own unique history.

Repression and cleansing were high on the Soviet agenda. Each of the newly incorporated territories in 1939–40 received three Soviet plenipotentiaries. The first was a politician who dealt with political and economic issues and bore general responsibility for the Sovietization of the territory. The second took care of military affairs. The third was responsible for security, meaning preparations for purges and repression.² During Stalin’s reign, terror in Estonia reached a scale which scarcely left any family untouched. Since the re-establishment of Estonian independence in 1991, the largest mass deportations in June 1941 and March 1949 are commemorated every year. They are sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) in Estonia for the terror inflicted by the Soviets and Nazis. This might also explain why Stalinist oppression is a central issue in Estonian historiography.³ In addition, the experience of violence has become important for Estonian identity.⁴

Soviet mass violence in the annexed Baltic States was first researched by émigré historians, who could not use archives and thus presented exaggerated estimates of the scale of repression.⁵ For example, Rein Taagepera called the period 1945–1953 “years of genocide,”⁶ a view shared by many members of the émigré community. More recently, Stalinist repressions in the postwar Baltic republics were called a “war of annihilation against the national elites.” According to Jörg Baberowski and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, Stalinism serves “in the collective memory of the Baltic nations as a synonym for attempted genocide.”⁷ Inside Soviet Estonia, repressions remained a taboo topic for historians until the Gorbachev years when the first articles began to appear in the press during the “Baltic Revolution” (Anatol Lieven). Thanks to the “archival revolution” after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, we have acquired a much more precise sense of the scale and nature of Soviet repression in Estonia. Several commissions have worked through relevant archival holdings. For example, members of Memento, the Estonian counterpart to Russia’s Memorial, explored the personal files of people who were arrested for political reasons or deported and compiled a database. Seven volumes of victim lists were published.⁸ An early book on occupation damages came out in 1991⁹ followed by the more comprehensive *White Book* in 2005.¹⁰ The Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity presented a first volume on the years 1940–45;¹¹ a second on the postwar period is in preparation. Unfortunately, many papers and books appeared only in Estonian,¹² while others are available in English or German.¹³

To sum up the state of research concerning Stalinist repressions briefly:¹⁴ out of a population of 1.1 million, approximately 47,000 were arrested for political reasons and 35,000 were deported.¹⁵ 34,000 were mobilized in 1941 into the Red Army and spent several months in labor camps where about one third perished. In addition, people were filtrated in special camps,¹⁶ bore heavy punishment for minor offenses, were confined as prisoners of war (POWs) or served in forced

labor units of the Red Army. Ethnic cleansing targeting mainly Ingrian Finns and Germans also took place after World War II. Jews were highly represented among the victims of Soviet policy too. For example, 10 percent of the small community was deported in 1941 alone.¹⁷ Roughly 12–14 percent of the population thus fell victim to Soviet persecution and four percent lost its life due to unbearable conditions or was executed. A few mass killings and more than 3,000 death penalty cases are documented,¹⁸ but the majority of deaths can be traced to criminal neglect in the camps, prisons or special settlements.

While émigré historians have often used the term “genocide,” the authors of this paper prefer to refer to “different waves of cleansing and repression,” since repressions targeted at different times the national elite, “social alien elements,” “kulaks,” “bourgeois nationalists,” “former people” (in Russian *byvshie liudi*), ethnic minorities, “collaborators with the Germans,” etc. Archival documents clearly show that in certain periods, for example in 1944–45, cleansing was the first aim of Soviet policy as explained in a report to Stalin. Mass violence served the aim of cleansing in many different ways by weeding out impure elements from society. In the fight against armed resistance or in the preparation of forced collectivization it played an essential role. While in the vast majority of cases the Kremlin took the initiative, using a top-down approach with bureaucratic methods to single out potential victims, there is also evidence of “spontaneous” violence initiated by authorities at the local level, as in the case of the destroyer battalions employed in the summer of 1941. They were given enormous freedom to choose their own course of action. We have to differentiate between the different cases and waves of repression. There is also evidence of a policy of compromise, as in the several amnesties offered to underground resisters.

In traditional Soviet historiography, repression and Russification tend to figure as related Soviet policies. New archival research has called this view into question, because the vast majority of Russian immigration in the Stalinist period happened spontaneously rather than as a policy conceived and implemented by the state.¹⁹ In addition, despite the large-scale repression of ethnic Estonians, Stalin’s short-term intention was obviously not Russification, but consolidation of power and integration of the unruly “western borderlands” into the Soviet Union. A single academic paper can scarcely treat in detail all repressive campaigns or paint a complete picture of Soviet violence in Estonia. Owing to space restrictions our aim is more to provide an overview than to present the results of our own original research or delve into methodology by discussing recent innovative approaches to the study of Soviet mass crimes.²⁰

Different waves of cleansing and repression in Estonia

Political arrests began immediately after the communist takeover of the Estonian capital, Tallinn, and the establishment of a regime sympathetic to the Soviet Union. They had clearly been prepared in advance by Soviet intelligence and the Soviet embassy. At first the Soviet regime targeted former employees of the political police. Politicians, police officers, entrepreneurs, army officers and

other members of the national elite were next. This was an organized campaign to destroy the most powerful part of the local national elite. Captured Estonian archives and media publications were thoroughly combed through to compile lists and special card files on “suspicious” persons. In addition, any evidence of opposition or resistance was severely punished. Approximately 8,000 persons were arrested for political reasons during the first year of Soviet rule. Of these, only a few hundred survived.²¹ For certain groups, like higher-ranking officers, policemen, public administrators or politicians the outcome had a nearly genocidal character. The probability of survival was very low and nearly half of the victims were executed or murdered, while the other half perished in the inhuman conditions of the Soviet camps during World War II. To put these casualties in perspective, the members of groups targeted for elimination by the Soviet Union before the War had a much lower chance of survival than participants in the underground resistance thereafter.

In autumn 1940, a campaign aimed against “speculators” started punishing minor wrongdoings in the economic sphere. A “speculator” meant anyone who capitalized on the economic transition from a market to command economy to derive “excessive” profits. Initially the state imposed only fines.²² Later, comparable offenses would be grounds for arrest, but since these offenses were registered as criminal rather than political we do not have data yet on the scale of this and similar campaigns. Since most incidents of “speculation” would not have been punished under a different political regime, we still should see those “speculators,” mainly petty traders, as political victims of Stalinism and not as criminals when they were sent to the camps.

A major wave of cleansing was carried out in all newly acquired territories from Estonia to Moldavia: the mass deportation of June 14, 1941. In Estonia, a second smaller deportation from the islands followed in July. Between 10,000 and 11,000 people were deported to the east, mainly complete families. Males were separated later and sent to the GULAG, while women, children and the elderly were consigned to special settlements.²³ The mortality rate is estimated to have been 60 percent.²⁴ The target groups included members of the national elite, their families and “unreformed” criminals and prostitutes, indicating that social engineering and purging society of its “alien social elements” was the main goal rather than enhancing security in preparation for a war with Germany.

The German attack on June 22, 1941 changed this situation. The rapid advance of German troops prompted Lavrentii Beria to issue orders two days later for the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of the Interior) to execute “counterrevolutionary elements” among the prisoners who could not be evacuated.²⁵ German soldiers and Estonian “forest brothers,” who supported the advance of the Wehrmacht,²⁶ would later find the severely tortured dead bodies in Estonian prisons.²⁷ In addition, the deployment of so-called “destroyer battalions” shattered infrastructure and fought local resistance, murdering numerous civilians in the countryside in the process.²⁸ While in the first case the mass murder was backed by the Stalinist regime and local activists exceeded their orders by using torture, in the second case violence occurred because the regime gave the battalions free reign

to use any means necessary and some troops panicked. In all more than 2,000 corpses were counted and identified later.²⁹ Due to extremely harsh conditions in Soviet detainment at the beginning of the War and widespread executions in the camps, the first year of Soviet rule saw the lowest survival rates among victims of Soviet repression.

The Soviets conducted a mass mobilization of young males in Estonia. In general, troops from the newly acquired territories proved not to be very reliable. Thus they were sent to special labor camps in late September 1941 by order of Lev Mekhlis, the Head of the Political Administration of the Red Army.³⁰ Lack of preparation and food made the condition in those camps unbearable. It is estimated that approximately one third of the young males sent there, some 12,000, died in the labor battalions.³¹ Obviously, these casualties were not the explicit aim of the regime, but the result of criminal neglect and unpreparedness. At the beginning of 1942, the state released the survivors from those camps and the majority was forced into the Red Army, but of course “politically dangerous persons” were sent to other places of detainment.

During the German occupation of Estonia the reign of terror continued.³² Nearly all Jews still in the country were murdered by the end of 1941, approximately 1,000. Several thousand alleged or real communists and sympathizers were detained and executed in the course of a few months. Later, the itinerant Roma became a target group and suffered the same fate. In all, roughly 8,000 people living in Estonia lost their lives to Nazi persecution. In the case of the Jews and Roma the term genocide is appropriate. Ethnic Russians were over-represented among the victims, too. After the first vicious months, the level of terror declined. Additionally, Soviet POWs were kept in special camps and Jews were sent to Estonia after 1943 as forced laborers. In some cases, transports to Estonia were destined to mass execution. Approximately 15,000 Soviet POWs and 6,500 Jews were executed or lost their lives owing to the unbearable conditions they were made to suffer.³³

Upon their arrival in the summer of 1941, German troops were welcomed as “liberators” since the population could not anticipate the wave of terror they were about to endure. Hopes of regaining independence did not materialize and the Germans exploited the country. Still, “ordinary” Estonians had less to fear than they had under Soviet rule. Thus, the view that the German occupation represented the “lesser of two evils” emerged. It might help serve to explain Estonian cooperation or even collaboration of with the German occupiers. Whether they were mobilized or volunteered, more Estonians served in World War II on the German side than on the Soviet side. Of course, many “volunteers” were forced into service against their will and the mobilization of the population of occupied territories contravened international law. Some Estonian units were implicated in war crimes and the Holocaust.³⁴ Before the Soviets re-entered in autumn 1944, a mass exodus to the West took place and approximately 70,000 fled the country while several thousands perished trying to get away.³⁵

The majority of the Soviet Estonian political and administrative leadership had been evacuated to the Soviet rear in 1941 along with 25,000 civilians.³⁶ For the

Stalinist leadership, the mobilization of evacuees for the Soviet war effort had priority, but the recapture of occupied territory was part of the long term plan as well. Cleansing would play a central role in this campaign. After evacuation, the security apparatus of the Estonian SSR (Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic) was temporarily disbanded, with the exception of those units conducting archival research with evacuated documents and surveying the media in occupied Estonia in order to compile files on potential enemies of the Stalinist regime and collaborators with the Germans.³⁷ This meant the regime continued to prepare the next wave of terror even during the period it was forced out of Estonia.

In 1943, the Soviet Union prepared for the reoccupation of Estonia by training potential, future occupiers. These preparations included courses for tractor drivers, book keepers and administrators, but also security personnel. By the end of 1943, the NKVD of Estonia had approximately 400 trained employees, still too few to carry out its anticipated responsibilities according to party leadership and security.³⁸ A total of 3,300 employees were needed, 550 of whom would serve as the heads of operative groups.³⁹ Those groups moved in the back of the Red Army taking control in “liberated” territory. At the request of Major Nikitinskii, the Head of the NKVD of the Soviet Headquarters of Archive Security, a few archivists were also involved in the work of operative groups to ensure the gathering of all important documents left by the enemy and transmitting them to the Department of Archives.⁴⁰ The more German trophy documents the Red Army captured, the more they could be used to expand the lists and files on people to be arrested. In the summer, shortly before the final breakdown of the German front in Estonia, the Estonian party leader Nikolai Karotamm and the first secretaries of Latvia and Lithuania met for 70 minutes with Stalin where they were debriefed on the implementation of future policy.⁴¹ In fact, the Soviets used tactics similar to the German Einsatzkommando 1a with the difference that the German special command started in 1941 with mass executions while the Soviet equivalent in 1944–45 was aimed at arrests and cleansing.

According to a joint directive issued by the Soviet People’s Commissar of the Interior and State Security respectively, Lavrentii Beriia and Vsevolod Merkulov, the Soviets needed to arrest the commanders and officers of units consisting of Soviet citizens fighting on the German side and higher ranking local administrators in the German occupied territory. People who had participated in war crimes or repressions and former Red Army soldiers who had defected to the German side were to be arrested as well. Estonians and other Soviet citizens who had fought in German units should at least pass a filtration camp (in Russian *filtratsiia*).⁴² Filtration camps were established for the investigation of persons with a questionable past. Nonetheless, many people who did not fit the above mentioned categories of the directive were also arrested as collaborators.

When the Red Army re-entered Estonia in September 1944, the biggest wave of political arrests began and lasted until the end of 1945.⁴³ At first, the primary targets were all people who had collaborated with or offered assistance to the enemy; the persecution of “bourgeois nationalists” came second. Soviet documents suggest that these priorities changed during this wave of cleansing.

“Bourgeois nationalists” became the main victims. Looking at Soviet documentation, cleansing was obviously the main goal of Soviet policy after the “liberation” of Estonia from the Germans.⁴⁴ It would be a misrepresentation to treat justice as an important factor in this process. Those, who were persecuted as “collaborators with the Germans” and “traitors to the fatherland” included, of course, some war criminals, but justice was not the main aim. In most of the cases, evidence would not have stood a fair trial. People were often persecuted simply for having belonged to certain units and not for their actions. Crimes committed outside the borders of the republic like the deeds of Estonian police battalions in Ukraine, Poland or Belarus were rarely prosecuted, because Soviet authorities paid less attention to them.⁴⁵ Many convictions were based on confessions after severe torture. In other words, the Soviet authorities did not intend to punish real crimes based on hard evidence as much they sought to purge society of anyone too closely affiliated with the former German occupiers. The turn against “bourgeois nationalists”—i.e. those who opposed the Soviet regime through their being rather than their actions—suggests that justice was not a primary factor.

The immediate postwar years witnessed a wave of spontaneous violence committed against the population. Soviet soldiers behaved as if stationed on enemy territory. According to the Estonian People’s Commissariat of the Interior they were responsible for the majority of registered crimes in late 1944.⁴⁶ Local party organizations complained in the capital, Tallinn, that soldiers were responsible for rape on an extraordinary scale. It should be mentioned, of course, that the soldiers of many armies during World War II turned to crime and terrorized the local population. In the Soviet case this behavior was somehow tolerated by Stalin and many commanding officers. One report by General-Major Lobachev offered an explanation for this development in Estonia and Latvia. A certain anti-Soviet and anti-Russian attitude prevailed in these territories, where the inhabitants seemed to live a better life than ordinary Soviet citizens even after German occupation. Many Soviet soldiers had spent time in German occupied territory or listened to accounts from there while advancing westward. The role of Baltic police battalions as a kind of a second occupation force was stressed. Thus, Estonian civilians, often perceived as bourgeois collaborators, bore the brunt of the revenge taken out by Soviet soldiers for German atrocities on the eastern front.⁴⁷

When the fighting ended, the Soviets built up a system of POW and filtration camps in Estonia. It is estimated that a total of 180,000–200,000 prisoners passed through those camps,⁴⁸ mainly Germans. We do not know exactly how many POWs from Estonia fell into Soviet captivity, but given the fact that 9,000 had been repatriated from other Soviet republics by 1948⁴⁹ and that the majority had been captured in Estonia, we could estimate that at least 20,000 Estonians became POWs. Additionally, 10,000 civilians were repatriated to Estonia and passed through a filtration camp. Having spent time in one of these camps resulted in interrogations about one’s role and service during German occupation. Many prisoners were finally released, others sent to special labor battalions or to

the Gulag. When held in a filtration camp, which could last months or even years without any accusation, one could be drafted into the Soviet Army, too. Not only were the inmates of the camps “filtrated”. In the chaotic final days of German occupation, tens of thousands of Estonians deserted their units fighting on the German side and went home. Those young men were drafted into the Red Army weeks later, where “filtration” started, too. German veterans, who could hide their service, became regular Soviet soldiers. The others were sent to construction battalions and a certain number were arrested.

Another type of Soviet violence was reactive. In 1945 Estonian armed resistance reached its peak, declining slowly after 1947. Still, even after the death of Stalin, a few stalwart “forest brothers” remained at large.⁵⁰ Armed resistance was one main reason why the Soviet regime turned against the “bourgeois nationalists” in 1945. The regime perpetrated atrocities in its fight against resistance. Relatives or alleged supporters were arrested and sometimes captured “forest brothers” executed, with the dead bodies left as a warning to anyone with thoughts of opposing Soviet rule. Destroyer or killer agents (in Russian *agent boevik*),⁵¹ provocateurs and informers were used, too. Nonetheless, the regime tried to establish a policy of de-escalation using legalization and amnesties to bring people out of the forest. Under the codes and regulations of warfare, armed non-combatants are subject to harsh punishment. Nevertheless, the struggle against the resistance movement led to approximately 3,000 casualties on both sides and thousands of arrests and deportations. In addition, thousands of family members of “forest brothers” succumbed to repressive measures including arrest, torture, economic ruin and deportation. Many were falsely accused of other crimes.

Other campaigns targeted petty crime, the failure to meet quotas for state procurement or timber deliveries, tax evasion, speculation, petty theft or attempts to circumvent the draconian labor legislation. Because these campaigns invoked criminal law rather than political paragraphs, today we lack the means to assess the scale of this violence. We might estimate that more than 10,000 persons were prosecuted and sent to the camps for minor offenses. These are people who most likely would not have been persecuted under a different political regime at all. Behind those measures were existing problems like the slack fulfillment of delivery quotas or low work discipline. Yoram Gorlizki has coined the term “campaign justice” to characterize this kind of persecution by the Stalinist state.⁵² Many of the victims have not even received recognition today and bear somehow still the stigma of having been “criminal.” The harsh prosecution of minor offenses should be seen in the context of a severe decline of the standard of living after the communist take-over. The state punished survival strategies in a period of hunger and extreme austerity. It has been estimated that excess mortality caused mainly by malnutrition reached a total of 40,000 in the 1940s,⁵³ a figure which nearly equals the number of victims of Soviet and Nazi state terror in Estonia.

The Stalinist state used ethnic cleansing, too, to homogenize territory and to punish “enemy nations.” Several incidents have special relevance in the Estonian context. The Baltic Germans, once a powerful elite, resettled “voluntarily” to

Germany in 1939–41 in what Dietrich Loeber called a “dictated option.”⁵⁴ In summer 1945, all remaining Baltic Germans were deported, including non-German family members, altogether approximately 400.⁵⁵ Ethnic Estonians in former Estonian territory handed over to the Russian SFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) were cleansed as “hostile elements.” For example in May 1950, 1,500 Estonians and Latvians were deported from the Pskov Oblast.⁵⁶ Ingrian Finns settling in Estonia after the war to escape persecution in their homeland mainly in the Leningrad oblast became subject to ethnic cleansing and were deported to the north of Russia.⁵⁷ Their number could have been approximately 20,000. Whether the Russification of northeast Estonia was the outcome of a willful policy of mass migration, segregation and ethnic cleansing or the result of peculiar circumstances remains a matter of debate.⁵⁸ Before Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, ethnic Estonians residing in the Soviet Union like Poles or Finns belonged to the “enemy nations” persecuted during the Great Terror on the basis of ethnicity.⁵⁹ In the Estonian campaign alone, 5,680 persons were arrested of which 4,672 were executed,⁶⁰ approximately three percent of all Estonians living in the USSR at that moment.

After the postwar cleansing, several smaller campaigns followed and the struggle with resistance continued in Estonia. Several thousand were arrested for political reasons. Because of the improvement of the conditions in the Gulag and the special settlements, apart from the years of hunger and famine in 1946–47,⁶¹ the less frequent use of the death penalty or even their temporary abolition in the USSR, survival rates were much higher than during previous campaigns.

In 1947, the Soviet Union implemented a plan to collectivize agriculture in the newly acquired territories. Initially, high taxation was imposed to drive the peasants “voluntarily” into collective farms and the process of singling out “kulaks,” richer peasants, began at the same time.⁶² The increased pressure on the peasantry led to more persecution of tax evasion and other “deviant” behavior. Nikolai Puusepp, the Deputy Head of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, stated on December 24, 1948: “Today we have 3,085 kulak households, of which approximately 400 have been liquidated with the help of [tax] debts [...] some liquidate themselves.”⁶³ Heads of households unable to pay their tax debts were punished by imprisonment, which could last up to two years.⁶⁴ Despite all this pressure, the vast majority of the rural population refused to join the *kolkhozes*. A few model farms were all the Soviet Union had to show for its efforts.

In January 1949, Stalin tired of the slow process of collectivization in the “western borderlands”; he met with the local political leaders and opted for a large-scale mass deportation, for which the necessary files were already compiled. The mass deportation of March 1949 with approximately 21,000 victims in Estonia alone, operation “Priboi,”⁶⁵ had three goals: (1) to accelerate the collectivization of agriculture by intimidating the rural population; (2) to cleanse society of families of “collaborators”, “kulaks”, “nationalists” or “social alien elements”, mainly after the “offender” had already been arrested; (3) to reduce resistance by

deporting sympathizers. The term “sympathizers” was used to describe family and households in which one member had resisted Soviet authority. The majority of those deported upon these grounds were women, children and the elderly. Mass violence led finally to collectivization.⁶⁶

Since the general situation in the Soviet Union had improved since the end of the war, this mass deportation did not result in as many casualties as previous deportations. Less than 15 percent of the victims died in special settlements in Siberia and Central Asia.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it stands out even among other Stalinist deportations in that most of the people were sent to special settlements for “eternity” without any hopes of redemption.⁶⁸ Except for those that resulted in the death penalty, convictions generally did not exceed 30 years (25 years in a camp and five years in exile). All of a sudden in 1948, the state began to treat “nationalists” and “kulaks” as if they possessed heritable traits that could be passed down from parents to their offspring. In a similar case, Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars deported as “enemy nations” by Stalin were not allowed to return home until Gorbachev’s perestroika. Consequently, the burden of guilt did not expire with time in the eyes of the Soviet authorities. In some cases, people were punished twice for the same offence. At least 800 persons, who had been deported as children in 1941 and managed to return to Estonia after the war somehow, were again arrested and sent back to exile after serving a time in the camps.⁶⁹

Mass violence would continue in Estonia until the death of Stalin in March 1953. One smaller mass deportation in 1951 targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses. 1950 saw a purge of party state apparatus and the cultural sphere known as the “Estonian Affair.” The Kremlin used an internal power conflict to replace Estonian party leadership and to make an example of the republic in order to discipline other local elites in the USSR. In a second phase of the purge, local dynamics heightened the scale of repressions, which continued until 1952.⁷⁰

With the beginning of De-Stalinization, amnesties were granted. By the early 1960s, most survivors had returned to Estonia from the camps and special settlements. But they were to be placed under agent surveillance in order to prevent any organization of former political prisoners. The 4th department of the KGB trained those agents, which led to the arrest of some former prisoners.⁷¹ Only a few victims were formally rehabilitated, and they were usually party members, before the large-scale rehabilitation campaign launched under Mikhail Gorbachev, which continued into the 1990s, when independent Estonia began compensating and restoring the property of “repressed persons.” A few Stalinist perpetrators have been convicted in court, normally organizers of mass deportation found guilty for crimes against humanity.⁷² As long as the Soviet Union existed the majority of surviving victims of Stalinism were not rehabilitated and formal discrimination against them continued until 1991. This discrimination ranged from restrictions on their place of residence to restrictions on their access to education, employment and career opportunities.

It is estimated that after the death of Stalin approximately 500 inhabitants of Estonia were arrested for political reasons,⁷³ of who a few died in custody. In a

few instances, the death penalty was imposed without sound evidence of guilt or for minor offenses. In other words, the scale of repression in Soviet Estonia returned to a level known in other authoritarian regimes. The same cannot be said about surveillance and infiltration by informers. Not only the files of those arrested and deported, but also the files of those who had merely fallen under suspicion, were kept by security until the break-up of the Soviet Union. More than one fourth of the population was implicated in these documents. In practical terms this meant that the bureaucratic means were in place for the Soviet leadership to begin another round of state terror at any moment, if it had chosen to do so.

Conclusion

Stalinist repression, mass flight, deportations, economic exploitation, World War II and Nazi occupation precipitated the loss of one quarter of the Estonian population.⁷⁴ The term “genocide” in Estonia is most aptly reserved for the Holocaust and the killing of the Gypsy population during the German occupation. Still, to put the relative local violence of these two regimes in comparative perspective, Stalinism caused five times more casualties among the Estonian population than Nazi rule. For the majority of the population, Stalinism was obviously more traumatic than its Nazi counterpart.⁷⁵ Not only the difference in the number of victims, but also the fact that Stalinist terror was more universal in its selection of enemies. Nobody was safe; nobody could feel secure. Especially after the mass deportation in 1949 with its seemingly random selection of victims, many people feared that they would become the next enemy of the people. Until Stalin’s death, the possibility of a new mass deportation was regularly discussed. While Nazi rule lasted only three years, Stalinism reigned for ten years, and the moral reckoning initiated during Khrushchev’s thaw was very limited and partial at best. For half a century Estonia endured the injustices of Soviet rule. In this paper we dealt with repression and terror, but one should not underestimate other more subtle psychological techniques of manipulation, which often involved the use of “compromising material” (in Russian *kompromat*). While the number of arrests did decline over time, this did not mean that the state had let down its guard or that people were under any less intensive surveillance than before. For example, in 1950, the Ministry of State Security of the Estonian SSR requested information from the archives on 42,118 persons or four percent of the population.⁷⁶ The state attempted to control society regularly and the “liquidation of alien elements” and the “purging of cadres” continued.

While we have expanded our knowledge of Soviet mass violence in Estonia a lot in recent years, there is still much research to be done. We need more local case studies of individual campaigns to understand how measures were implemented on the ground and to give the victims and the perpetrators a name, a story, and a face. Since there are virtually no restrictions on research on Stalinism in Baltic archives, it is even possible to use documents in the holdings of state security or the republican ministry of the interior. The range of accessible material necessary for a more complete picture of Stalinist crimes thus exceeds anything

in the central archives of the former USSR in Moscow. Nevertheless, Estonian Soviet documents cannot entirely replace their Russian counterparts. Research in Moscow must also continue to enable scholars to understand local conditions. Enormous holdings in various archives there are still open and waiting to be explored. As a comprehensive picture of individual campaigns and the fate of individuals begins to emerge from research, the task of Soviet historians will change. What is needed in the future will be a shift towards interpreting and analyzing the intermingled reasons for Soviet crimes in one republic and connecting them with the broader context of the history of Stalinism. Since most of Stalinist persecution in Estonia happened in the post-war period during late Stalinism, which is much less researched than the 1920s or 1930s, we might expect that the next decades will bring new perspectives and interpretations concerning the entire USSR and the Estonian SSR.

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